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Partisan bias in opinion formation on episodes of political controversy: evidence from Great Britain

Abstract

Voters form judgments about political controversies through a process of motivated reasoning driven by two goals: the desire to reach an objectively accurate conclusion (*accuracy*) and the desire to reach a conclusion congruent with pre-existing views (*direction*). The impact of directional goals may depend on political sophistication. We test our hypotheses using data from a 2011 British survey that measured voters' opinions on three specific real-life political controversies. We use voters' underlying tolerance of political misconduct as an indicator of accuracy goals and party identification as a measure of directional goals. We find that partisan predispositions and tolerance of political misconduct are both important in shaping voter opinions and that partisanship has the strongest influence among the more knowledgeable and interested voters. These findings further our understanding of how voters react to political controversies and how they process new political information.

Introduction

Controversies about the behaviour of a politician are common in any democracy. Such controversies are often characterised by intense media attention and an incremental uncovering of the facts of the case. Whether politicians can survive a political controversy depends on a variety of factors. For example, the so-called ‘Alistair Campbell rule’, named after British Prime Minister Tony Blair’s former director of communications, states that ‘no Minister can survive beyond a two-week feeding frenzy in the press’.¹ But while media focus on political controversy undoubtedly puts instances of political misconduct on the public agenda, the consequences of such an episode depend on the opinions that voters form about just how wrong and punishable a politician’s behaviour was. For one, nowadays almost instant polls ask voters for their opinion regarding the events, and the results of these polls can influence both media coverage and politicians’ strategies. Moreover, political controversy can also have electoral consequences, for example when voters punish misbehaving politicians at subsequent elections (Ahuja, et al. 1994, Banducci and Karp, 1994, Clarke, et al. 1999, Dimock and Jacobsen 1995, Farrell et al. 1998, Pattie and Johnston forthcoming, Peters and Welch 1980, Vivyan et al. forthcoming, Welch and Hibbing 1997).

Voters form their opinions on the moral acceptability and appropriate consequences of a politician’s actions in the same way they form opinions about other political events: through a process of motivated reasoning (Kunda 1990; Lodge and Taber 2000). According to this view, voters form opinions by incorporating and evaluating new incoming information, but they do so in ways that are guided by specific goals. The two goals highlighted by political psychologists are accuracy and directional goals (Lodge and Taber 2000). Accuracy goals exist due to the need to reach a *correct*, truthful conclusion. Directional goals exist due to the need to reach a *specific* conclusion, so one that is in accordance with prior opinions and

¹ This is the version of the Alistair Campbell rule cited by Polly Toynbee in the Guardian, 16 December 2004 (<http://www.guardian.co.uk/politics/2004/dec/16/schools.davidblunkett>).

predispositions. These two goals are always present, though one of the two is of often stronger than the other (Lodge and Taber 2000).

In this paper, we assess the influence of these two motivations in opinion formation on political controversy. We do so by considering the effect of two voter attitudes: (1) a voter's underlying tolerance of political misconduct and (2) his or her partisanship. If a voter's tolerance of political misconduct in general predicts reactions to political controversy, then voter opinions are shaped by accuracy goals: their view on the specific episode is consistent with the toughness of their underlying normative stance towards political misbehaviour.

In contrast, if partisanship predicts reactions to the episode, then a voter's opinion is shaped by directional goals. It is well-known that partisanship, also known as party identification or party affect, has an important impact on how voters react to and interpret political events (e.g. Campbell et al. 1960; Zaller 1992; Bartels 2002; Johnston 2006). This has been elaborated on in more recent research on motivated reasoning and selective processing (Lodge and Taber 2000), also in relation to political scandals (Fischle 2000). In the case of political controversy, we would expect partisanship to exert a directional effect on voter reasoning: if the politician is from the party the voter is attached to, then the voter's judgment may be more lenient, whereas if the politician is from a rival party, then the voter's judgment may be tougher (Chang and Kerr 2009).

Assessing whether voter opinions are shaped more by general normative standards or by pre-existing sympathies is important for two reasons. First, from a normative point of view we want to know what the sources of public disapproval of politician's behaviour are. Ideally, voters would base their reactions not on partisan or other types of affect, but on careful consideration of the facts about the politician's conduct and by benchmarking this conduct against their personal moral or ethical expectations of politicians. Second, knowing the extent to which the two goals shape opinions may help us understand the course of political controversy. If public reactions depend on the extent to which generally held ethical norms

were violated, the politicians should be more likely to face calls for resignation depending on how normatively wrong their actions were. However, if public reactions depend largely on affect, then the popularity of the politician's party (and his or her own popularity) will become important.

Finally, we also consider whether the influence of directional goals depends on a voter's political awareness and knowledge (Shani 2006; Blais et al. 2010). On the one hand, it may be that low levels of political sophistication mean that the reliance on partisanship as a guide may be stronger; on the other hand, it may be precisely the more sophisticated voters who have the motivation and ability to 'refuse to internalise messages that they recognize as inconsistent with their underlying predispositions' (Zaller 1992: 121).

We carry out our empirical analysis using data from a specially conducted nationally representative internet survey conducted in the UK in May 2011 that measured voter reactions to three recent or on-going controversial episodes involving prominent politicians: the Conservative Ken Clarke and the Liberal Democrats Chris Huhne and David Laws. Our research design has a number of advantages for investigating voter reaction to political controversy. Even though the three episodes of political controversy that we study are different in nature, they all were marked by widespread public disapproval of the event and ran the risk that the revelations would damage the participant's reputation. They are thus comparable episodes and fit Thompson's (2000:13-14) admittedly broad definition of a political scandal. Secondly, we use actual episodes involving real-life politicians as opposed to hypothetical scenarios, which should increase the likelihood that responses will reflect genuine feelings about the event as opposed to reactions to an 'imagined' scenario. We therefore do not have to temper our findings with consideration of the impact of hypothetical scenarios on voter response. Finally, each episode of political controversy took place very near to the time of the survey or was currently on-going when the survey was fielded. This

ensures that the events are fresh in voter's minds, allowing us to estimate the impact of accuracy and directional goals at the point in time when voters are forming opinions.

In the next section, we describe in greater detail how accuracy and directional goals may influence opinion formation on political scandals and how political sophistication may moderate this influence. After describing the survey and the coding approach, we present our results and then discuss the broader relevance of our findings.

Motivated reasoning and episodes of political controversy

Individuals generally develop political opinions through the cognitive process known as motivated reasoning (Kunda 1990, Lodge and Taber 2000). According to Kunda (1990: 481), such reasoning is what occurs when 'forming impressions, determining beliefs and attitudes, evaluating evidence, and making decisions'. This reasoning is *motivated* because it is goal-oriented: we reason because we want to achieve a particular outcome. According to research in cognitive psychology, individuals are motivated primarily by accuracy and directional goals. A voter guided solely by accuracy goals would consider the available information, search out confirming and disconfirming evidence, and come to a reasoned conclusion. Such an individual would be what Lodge and Taber (2000) call a 'classical rationalist'.

One way in which accuracy goals may shape opinion formation during episodes of political controversy is as follows. First, voters have some pre-existing moral standards by which they judge the conduct of politicians. Existing research has shown that people indeed have well-developed notions of right and wrong regarding politicians' behaviour and that these can be adequately summarised using a single summary indicator (Allen and Birch 2012). When confronted with information about political controversy, voters then judge how wrong the behaviour of the politician was against these personal moral political standards. Those voters with tougher standards will then develop more negative views of the politician than those voters who are more tolerant of wrongdoing. In addition to their view on how

wrong the behaviour was, voters will also form an opinion about the consequences that the politician should face. While the range of ‘punishments’ for wrongdoing is large, from simple reprimands to large fines or prison terms, media reporting and public discussion usually focus on whether the politician needs to resign.

In sum, one way in which opinion formation is guided by accuracy goals is through the benchmarking of a specific instance of misconduct against a voter’s own tolerance of political misconduct in general. Such careful consideration may seem like the way an ideal democratic citizen should develop preferences.

However, Lodge and Taber (2000: 186) rightly argue that such an individual could only ever exist in ‘the ideal worlds of philosophy or fiction’, and that voters are also likely to be guided by directional goals. In reasoning about episodes of political controversy, individuals might therefore want to reach not an accurate but a preferred conclusion. This motivation already manifests itself in how individuals collect information: those guided by directional goals actively seek out facts that supports their predispositions (confirmation bias), see confirmatory arguments as compelling and opposing arguments as unsatisfactory (prior attitude effect) and use their reasoning powers to argue against arguments that contradict their desired conclusion (disconfirmation bias) (Olson and Zanna 1993; Taber and Lodge 2006).

What pre-existing opinions and sympathies underlie directional goals in opinion formation on episodes of political controversy? Voters may of course already have a view on the specific politician before the episode began, for example that they like and trust him or her. They may also have views on the political class in general, for example that they believe that corruption and misbehaviour is widespread. While these are important prior opinions, in this paper we concentrate on partisanship as a source of predispositions. Affect towards political parties has been shown to have a large impact on how voters process information, form opinions and perceive facts (Campbell et al. 1960, Zaller 1992, Fischle 2000, Taber and

Lodge 2006, Gaines et al. 2007, Nyhan and Reifler 2009), also outside the United States (Evans and Andersen 2006; Marsh and Tilley 2010, Tilley and Hobolt 2011).

The influence of partisanship on opinions about episodes of political controversy should be as follows. If voters have a positive prior view of the politician's party, then their directional goal will be to exonerate the politician or to tolerate his or her actions if at all possible.² If they have negative prior views, the directional goal will be to believe that the politician engaged in severe wrongdoing and should face consequences, for example resignation. These directional goals will influence opinion formation: voters attached to a party may thus seek out or be more open to information casting doubt on guilt or downplaying the severity of the politician's actions. They may also discount revelations about that politician as unconvincing and be more sceptical of information implicating that politician. In other words, directional goals mean that voters have a desired conclusion before they begin to form an opinion about the specific episode of political controversy, and this will affect how they gather and process information and then decide on their view on the events.

In sum, both partisanship and underlying tolerance of political misconduct are likely to influence how wrong individuals think the action of a politician is and whether he or she should resign. In this paper, we test the extent to which each source of motivated reasoning influences voter opinions on specific instances of political controversy.

The role of political sophistication

Because voters are heterogeneous, the influence of partisan affect on opinions about scandals may not be the same for all individuals. Instead, the outcome of this reasoning process may depend on characteristics of the voter. In this paper, we consider the role of a voter's political sophistication (Luskin, 1987, Zaller 1992), which we treat as the extent to which a voter pays

² A rival expectation would be that partisan identifiers may want the politician to resign in order to 'decontaminate the brand' of their party by getting rid of unpopular or controversial politicians.

attention to and knows about the domain of politics (Gomez and Wilson 2001). In the literature on the cognitive effects of party identification, there is an important debate surrounding how political awareness and knowledge are related to motivated reasoning.

On the one hand, there are arguments that the least sophisticated would be the most biased. This is because such voters would be particularly likely to have strong directional and weak accuracy goals. Relatively unsophisticated voters will not be interested enough in politics to put much effort into reaching a ‘correct’ conclusion (Delli-Carpini and Keeter, 1996: 114, Lodge and Taber 2000, Shani 2006). Such voters might therefore also be more inclined towards using heuristics in determining their political opinions. This means that they may rely more on simple decision rules when forming beliefs about politicians’ behaviour. In turn, more sophisticated voters should arguably have more objective opinions (Berelson et al., 1954) as they are generally less likely to rely on simple heuristics and may care more about reaching accurate conclusions.

On the other hand, other scholars argue that voters with higher levels of political sophistication may be *more* biased as they have invested more time and resources in formulating their opinions and will, accordingly, fight to preserve them (Lodge and Taber, 2000: 211). Thus, Shani (2006: 31) concludes that ‘political knowledge does not correct for partisan bias in perception of “objective” conditions, nor does it mitigate the bias. Instead, unfortunately, it enhances the bias; party identification colours the perceptions of the most politically informed citizens far more than relatively less informed citizens.’ In this view, partisan bias affects decisions more among people with higher levels of political knowledge because they are also more likely to recognize the partisan aspects of an issue in the first place and are able to *consciously* judge it in relation to their pre-existing partisan loyalties (Zaller, 1992: 121).

The theory and evidence on the moderating influence of political sophistication is therefore mixed and inconclusive. In this paper, we contribute to this debate by assessing how

political sophistication affects voter judgements on episodes of political controversy.

Importantly, how political sophistication influences opinion formation also affects the balance of accuracy and directional goals in how voters react to such episodes. We will now turn to an empirical test of the influence of general attitudes towards political misconduct and of partisanship on scandal opinions.

Data

We fielded a number of survey questions as part of a broader YouGov internet survey between 20 and 23 May 2011. Sanders et al. (2007) provide evidence for the reliability of such internet-based surveys. The total sample size was 1937. All questions used in this paper are presented in the Appendix in the order they were asked.

We asked respondents about their opinions concerning one recent and two on-going episodes of political controversy. The first such episode involved David Laws, a Liberal Democrat MP who had to resign as Chief Secretary to the Treasury on 29 May 2010, just 17 days after the deal to create a coalition government was announced. He had claimed parliamentary expenses for rooms he rented in a flat belonging to his partner. The second episode was that surrounding Chris Huhne, the Liberal Democrat Secretary of State for Energy and Climate Change, who at the time of our survey was being accused of putting pressure on his ex-wife to take responsibility for a traffic violation (and collect points) even though he himself had been at the wheel of the car at the time.³ The third episode of controversy concerned statements made by Ken Clarke, the Conservative Lord Chancellor and Secretary of State for Justice, on 18 May 2011. He had proposed halving the sentences of criminals who pleaded guilty early, even those of rapists; by using the term ‘serious rape’, he had also appeared to argue that some forms of rape were not necessarily ‘serious’.

³ Huhne subsequently resigned in February 2012.

Each MP involved was serving as a member of the Coalition government at the time the events occurred. As a result of the high-ranking status of these politicians, the events were covered heavily in the news media. The level of coverage and the relatively similar profile of these MPs make these cases comparable for the purposes of this study. Further, an additional feature that adds to the explanatory power of our case choices is the differing nature of the controversial episodes themselves – one was financial, one moral and one policy-based. Past research has found that voter reaction to scandal can differ depending on the type of scandal it is (Funk 1996, Welch and Hibbing 1997). Therefore, if we find consistent effects across the three types of political controversy we can usefully add to the extant discussion on variation in voter reaction to such episodes by focusing on the impact of partisan predispositions and general attitudes towards political wrongdoing in informing their response.

In the survey, we first briefly described the event in neutral terms and asked whether the respondent had heard of it. Approximately 88 per cent had heard about the episode involving Ken Clarke, 82 per cent about that involving Chris Huhne and 77 per cent about David Laws' scandal. To those that answered 'yes', we then asked two further questions on their opinion on the politician involved. Our first question asked whether the politician's actions were right or wrong, taking everything into account. The response scale ranged from 0 to 10, with 0 labelled 'wrong' and 10 'right'. This question measures the respondent's opinion about the gravity of the specific politician's behaviour. Figure 1 shows how the responses to this question are distributed in our sample across the three episodes (with the scale reversed so that 10 is 'wrong'). We can see that our respondents were similarly hard in the cases of David Laws and Chris Huhne. They are the most divided concerning Kenneth Clarke, who is the only one of the three politicians where many respondents give moderate 'wrongness' responses. This shows that opinions on episodes of political controversy are not knee-jerk responses: voters do distinguish between the politicians involved. It is also worth noting that the correlation of opinions between the three episodes is relatively low: the correlation is 0.36

for the perceived wrongness of the actions of Huhne and Laws, 0.20 for those of Huhne and Clarke and 0.12 between those of Laws and Clarke.

Figure 1 about here

We then measured opinions about appropriate consequences of the politician's behaviour with our second question, which asked whether the politician should resign or not. Resignation is usually the focus of the media-led public debate on political wrongdoing (Dowding and Kang, 1995). When politicians lose their job, this is a sign that their position had become untenable. Resignation has also been shown to boost the popularity of the government as the resignation indicates that the PM has 'control' over his administration and can act to restore faith in the establishment (Dewan and Dowding, 2005). When scandals occur, the focus of media reporting is usually on whether new revelations increase the likelihood of resignation or on how many days the politician can still remain in her post. We therefore believe that this question captures opinions on the appropriate consequences well. In our sample, 79 per cent said Laws should have resigned, 62 per cent said the same for Chris Huhne, and only 34 per cent believed that Ken Clarke should step down.

Our two core independent variables measure respondents' underlying tolerance of political misconduct and their partisanship. We measure a respondent's underlying tolerance of political misconduct based on his or her reactions to 14 hypothetical scenarios involving political misconduct. This follows the approach suggested by Allen and Birch (2012). Specifically, we present a short scenario to respondents and ask whether they think the action described was wrong and punishable, wrong but understandable or not wrong at all. The full list of scenarios is included in the Appendix. We then create a composite indicator based on all answers to these questions; the Cronbach's alpha for the scale is a satisfactory 0.73. The indicator is calculated using responses to as many questions as each respondent answered, so 'don't know' answers are disregarded. We standardise this scale so that it has a mean of 0 and

a standard deviation of 1, with higher values indicating a greater intolerance of political misconduct in general.⁴

We measure party identification using the standard British Election Study question (‘Generally speaking, do you think of yourself as Conservative, Labour, Liberal Democrat or what?’). We use the answers to this question that respondents provided to YouGov when they first signed up to the panel. This has the advantage that the responses were recorded in a different, prior survey and mostly before the scandals occurred.⁵

We also interact our measure of partisanship with a measure of political sophistication. We construct this using questions measuring attention to politics and political knowledge. We measure attention to politics using answers to a question asking respondents to rate how much attention they generally pay to politics on a 0-10 scale, with 0 labelled ‘pay no attention’ and 10 ‘pay a great deal of attention’. There are many different ways of measuring political knowledge, which can itself be divided into several sub-domains (Johann 2012). Our aim in this study was to measure respondents’ knowledge of prominent political actors and their current role. We therefore decided to measure political knowledge by providing respondents with a list of six politicians and asked which of these were currently in the UK Cabinet; only three of the politicians actually were. Respondents could select as many politicians as they wanted; ‘all of the above’ and ‘none of the above’ were further options. The maximum possible correct number of answers is 6, a score that could be attained if the respondent

⁴ In our survey, we also asked respondents whether they thought it was more important to have honest and trustworthy or successful and hardworking politicians; this question is modelled on that used by Allen and Birch (2011). This question can also be seen as a measure of general tolerance of wrongdoing by politicians. We ran all our models using this alternative question, leading to very similar results in both significance and magnitude. Those replying that having honest and trustworthy politicians is more important were coded as 1, all others as 0.

⁵ However, the disadvantage of using these responses is that we do not know when each respondent joined the panel. To make sure our results did not depend on this measure, we re-ran our models using current vote intention (which we measured in the same survey) rather than party identification. The empirical results remain substantively the same across our models.

correctly chose the three names that corresponded to members of the Cabinet, and only those three names. In other words, we score each name separately and give 1 point if the respondent correctly said whether that politician was or was not in the Cabinet. The resulting variable thus ranges from 0 to 6, indicating the number of correct answers. Those answering ‘all’ or ‘none’ were coded as giving three correct answers. Only 11 per cent of respondents got fewer than three answers right, while 41 per cent gave six correct answers. In our analyses, we measure sophistication using an index of attention and knowledge created by first standardizing the two scales so that they have a mean of 0 and a variance of 1 and then calculating the average of the two items. The resulting index correlates at 0.86 with both the attention and knowledge scales. We rescale this variable to have a mean of 0 and a standard deviation of 1.⁶

In our models, we use several controls that may influence respondent opinions about episodes of political controversy. First, political sophistication itself may shape opinions directly: views on an episode of political controversy may change the more we know about the events, though the direction of this effect may depend on the nature of the politician’s wrongdoing. For example, in the case of Clarke’s statements about rape, more politically interested respondents might have read more about the events and shown greater understanding for his position as a result. Next, a lack of trust has been shown to have a large impact on how voters assess scandals (Dancey 2012). We measure general trust in people using a 0-10 scale, with 0 labelled ‘most people can’t be trusted’ and 10 ‘most people can be trusted’. It is important to note that this is only a measure of interpersonal trust. Political trust, so the ‘global affective orientation toward government’ (Rudolph and Evans 2005: 661), may also have an important influence on voter opinions (e.g. Mishler and Rose 2001), but unfortunately this voter attitude was not measured in our survey. Next, we assess whether

⁶ We also ran all analyses with the attention and knowledge scales separately, and the results are substantively very similar.

people think politicians are socially and behaviourally distant with a question that asks respondents whether they agree or disagree with the statement that ‘Politicians are not that different from people like me’; responses were measured on a five-point Likert scale. We also include three socio-demographic controls: sex (female coded as 1, male as 0); age in years (and age squared to allow for nonlinearities); and social class (ABC1, or higher managerial or professional, lower managerial or administrative and skilled or lower non-manual, coded as 1; C2DE, or skilled manual, semi- or unskilled manual and others, as 0). Like party attachment, the variables sex, class and age (i.e. year of birth) are measured when respondents first joined the panel; here, we either do not need to be concerned about significant changes (age and sex) or can assume that change will be very limited (class). Summary statistics for all variables can be found in Appendix 1.

Results

We begin our discussion of the results by examining voter opinions on the politician’s actions. We then consider views on whether the politician should resign before examining the moderating influence of political sophistication.

Voter opinions on a politician’s actions

Our first results concern the influence of partisanship and general attitudes on right and wrong on how wrong voters think a politician’s behaviour was. Our dependent variable is the respondent’s assessment of this ‘wrongness’ for each of our three politicians, which we model using OLS regression.⁷ We measure general attitudes towards political misconduct using the single indicator described above. We assess the influence of partisanship by including a party identification dummy for each party. We use the party of the politician involved as the

⁷ We also ran all analyses using ordinal logistic regression so as not to assume that the distances between the eleven scale points are all equal. All results are substantively very similar to the ones presented here.

reference category in every case. For each episode of political controversy, we present two sets of models: the first uses just our key independent variables, while the second includes additional controls. To account for the heteroskedastic distribution of errors, we use robust standard errors throughout.

We present the results for each episode (Laws, Huhne and Clarke) in Models 1 to 6 (Table 1). First, Models 2, 4 and 6 show that our control variables do not always have the same effects. For the Laws episode, only trust helps to explain perceptions of wrongness: those with greater levels of trust are expected to give lower wrongness scores. For the Huhne episode, significant associations exist for political sophistication and age: older and less sophisticated voters are expected to give higher wrongness scores. For the Clarke episode, trust and sophistication are again significant predictors, but so is the perception of politicians: those who do not think politicians are like them are expected to give higher wrongness scores. Women and respondents from the C2DE class are also expected to think Clarke's actions were more wrong. The different effects of our control variables across the three episodes of political controversy suggest that they did vary in their nature.

Turning to our key variables, we can see that a respondents' general tolerance of political misconduct has a strongly significant effect on their views on each specific scandal across all models. A one-standard deviation increase in the intolerance scale leads to a predicted increase on the 0-10 right-wrong scale of between 0.36 and a 0.53. The variables measuring partisanship are also significant in many cases. For instance, the effect of the 'no identification' indicator is estimated at between 0.47 and 0.68, with all p-values below 0.1. This means that having no party identification generally increases the perceived wrongness of the politician's actions compared to identifying with the party of the politician.

To compare the predicted effect of our key variables, we present in Figure 2 the expected changes in the 'wrongness' scale, calculated based on our models that include the set of controls. The top four rows show how much the perceived wrongness of the politician's

actions is expected to change when the general intolerance of political wrongdoing changes by 1, 2, 3 or 4 standard deviations. A change of one standard deviation in general attitudes towards political misconduct can be seen as a moderate shift, for example from 0 to 1, i.e. from an average to a moderately tough position. A change of two standard deviations is equivalent to a large shift, for example from -1 to 1, or from a moderately lenient to a moderately tough position. We also present the expected change in the wrongness scale for various shifts in party identification, either from identifying with the politician's party or from identifying with no party. The changes that are significant at a 0.05 level are indicated by an asterisk.

Figure 2 about here

Party identification often has substantively large effects on voter opinions on the episodes of political controversy. For example, moving from identifying with the politician's party to having no identification has an effect that is about as large as a one standard-deviation change in intolerance of political wrongdoing. To take the case of Huhne: a one-unit shift in general intolerance is expected to lead to a 0.36 point increase in perceived wrongness, while moving from identifying with the Liberal Democrats to identifying with no party is expected to lead to a 0.47 point increase (this latter effect is only significant at the 0.1 level). Still looking at the Chris Huhne scandal, a further shift from no identification to Labour partisanship is expected to lead to a 0.35 increase in perceived wrongness. Finally, the expected effects of moving from shared partisanship with the politician to having the partisanship of a rival party are naturally even greater. The differences between identifying with Labour and identifying with the politician's party or with no party are particularly stark and strongly significant. For example, again looking at the Huhne scandal, the wrongness perceived by a Labour identifier is expected to be 0.82 units higher than that perceived by a Lib Dem identifier.

In sum, the effect of partisanship on specific opinions about episodes of political controversy is strong and consistent, as is the effect of general intolerance towards political misconduct. Clearly, voters are guided by both accuracy and directional goals in how they react to specific scandals. In assessing politicians' behaviour, prior partisan affect matters at least as much as the general normative standards one judges a politician against.

Resignation

When it comes to political controversies, the debate is just as much about the appropriate consequences of the particular wrongdoing as about the gravity of the case itself. Here, we consider the question of whether a politician should resign. How do accuracy and directional goals affect calls for resignation?

To answer this question, we consider the estimated impact of partisanship and general intolerance of political misconduct on right and wrong on whether a respondent thinks a politician should resign. Our dependent variable here is the resignation question for the three scandals, coded 1 if respondents think the politician should resign and 0 for those who do not or who answer 'don't know'. We model this response using binary logistic regression. The party identification variable is coded as in previous models. Again, we show the results from two sets of models: first with only the key independent variables and then controlling for the same variables in Models 2, 4 and 6.⁸

We present the results in Models 7 to 12, Table 2. Turning directly to our two key variables, we can see that general intolerance of political misconduct always has a strongly

⁸ We also ran the same models while controlling for the respondent's perceived wrongness of the politician's actions. This control obviously accounts for a lot of the variation in our dependent variable, especially as the two questions were asked together in the survey. Nevertheless, our results do not change substantively if we include it: while the impact of partisanship and general attitudes towards right and wrong decreases, the relative magnitudes of their impact remain largely the same.

significant effect on opinions on resignation. Similarly, the dummy variables measuring party identification almost all have a strongly significant impact on calls for resignation.

Table 2 about here

To understand the magnitude of these effects, it helps to calculate predicted changes in the dependent variable, as in Figure 2. In Figure 3, we therefore present changes in the predicted probability of thinking the politician should resign, based on Models 8, 10 and 12.⁹ We set all control variables to their mean (continuous variables) or mode (indicator variables). For the general intolerance of political misconduct variable, we set partisanship to ‘none’ and then calculate four ‘typical’ changes in tolerance: from very lenient to very tough (-2 to 2), from moderately lenient to moderately tough (-1 to 1), from moderately lenient to average (-1 to 0) and from average to moderately tough (0 to 1). For the effect of partisanship, we hold general attitudes towards political misconduct at 0.

Figure 3 about here

We can see that a shift between partisanship and lack thereof is again similar to a shift from an average to a moderately tough or lenient moral position on political misconduct. For example, looking at the Clarke scandal, moving from -1 to 0 leads to a predicted increase in the probability of calling for resignation of 0.1. Similarly, moving from a Conservative party identification to having none is also predicted to lead to a 0.1 increase. The equivalent values are similar for the other scandals and party identifications as well.

Moreover, shifting from partisan identification with the politician’s party to that of a rival party is roughly equivalent to a two standard-deviation shift in tolerance of political misconduct. In the Clarke scandal, moving from a moderately lenient to a moderately tough position would increase the probability of wanting Clarke to resign by 0.22. Moving from

⁹ All predicted probabilities are calculated using the SPost package in Stata (Long and Freese, 2005).

identifying with the Conservatives to identifying with Labour is predicted to lead to a similar change of 0.2. Again, other values are similar.

In sum, the impact of partisanship again appears to be of roughly equal magnitude compared to the general intolerance of political misconduct. Accuracy and directional goals both clearly influence calls for resignation, and do so strongly. In this, opinions on resignation are similar to opinions on the wrongness of a politician's behaviour.

Political sophistication

Finally, we hypothesised that political sophistication may moderate the impact of partisan identification on opinions on episodes of political controversy. To test this, we re-run Models 2, 4 and 6, this time adding an interaction effect between party identification on the one hand and our measure of political sophistication based on attention to politics and political knowledge on the other. The full results are presented in Models A.1 to A.3 in Appendix 2.¹⁰ We present results graphically following the recommendations of Brambor et al. (2006).

Figure 4 shows how the effect of party identification depends on a voter's level of political sophistication. The panels of the Figure also include the distribution of the variable as a histogram. The Figure shows a clear pattern, and one that is quite consistent across the three episodes of political controversy: the effect of partisanship on specific reactions to these events is greater for those respondents with higher levels of political sophistication. These results are clearest for the comparison between the main opposition party – Labour – and the party of the politician involved in the episode. The interaction coefficients are thus significant at conventional levels for Labour identifiers for all three episodes. In other words, we can conclude with confidence that the difference in opinions between Labour identifiers and

¹⁰ We also carried out the same analyses using resignation as the dependent variable. The results are substantively similar for the Huhne and Clarke controversies. For the Laws scandal, there is no moderating effect of political awareness on the influence of partisanship on resignation views.

voters who identify with the party of the politician involved becomes accentuated among the more politically sophisticated. When comparing Conservative to Liberal Democrat identifiers in the cases of Huhne and Laws, there is a stronger effect of partisanship as sophistication increases only for the Huhne episode. Finally, comparing Liberal Democrat to Conservative identifiers in the Clarke episode, we see no clear difference in the effect depending on sophistication.

Figure 4 about here

Substantively, the moderating effect of sophistication is relatively constant across the episodes and the two measures. At low levels of sophistication, there is often no biasing effect of party identification. However, at higher levels of sophistication the impact of partisanship is clear and strong. In sum, there is a clear pattern regarding how political sophistication moderates the impact of partisanship on opinion formation: greater sophistication leads to stronger directional goals in motivated reasoning. While past evidence is mixed, here the finding is straightforward. The more attention voters pay to politics and the more they know, the more likely it is that their reactions to specific episodes of political controversy are shaped by their predispositions. This indicates that the arguments made by Taber and Lodge (2006) and Shani (2006) have a strong foundation, also in a non-US context.

Conclusion

What influences voter reactions to episodes of political controversy? This research has suggested that accuracy and directional goals are both important to understanding how voters respond to reports of misbehaviour by politicians. We measured accuracy goals using the impact of general tolerance of political misconduct and directional goals by the influence of partisanship. Our findings indicate that these two factors are both important in determining how voters evaluate a political controversy.

Moreover, we have shown that partisanship exerts more force on those voters who are more politically sophisticated. It is not the case that weakly informed voters use a politician's party affiliation as a simple decision rule to guide responses. Instead, it is among the more sophisticated voters that partisan leanings have the greatest influence. This may be because it is these voters who are better able to interpret new information in light of their predispositions and to use their cognitive resources to disregard disconfirmatory information.

Our overall findings can be interpreted in two ways. A positive interpretation would be that voters' responses to political misbehaviour are clearly guided by their general attitudes towards what is acceptable and what is not in political life. Overall normative standards have a clear, substantial and consistent impact on how wrong voters think a politician's actions were and whether he or she should resign. A more balanced view would stress that voters are also strongly influenced by their partisan leanings as by their normative standards. Like views on right and wrong, partisanship is a powerful influence on voter reactions.

We would expect partisanship to have a similar effect in other scandals and in other countries. For one, we found similar effects across the three controversies, even though they differed quite significantly in their nature: one was mainly financial, one moral and one policy-based. In addition, existing scholarship argues that the influence and importance of party identification in Britain is similar to that in other European countries and lower than in the United States (Shiveley 1979; Westholm and Niemi 1992; Dalton 2008; Milazzo et al. 2012). To the extent that this indeed the case, the influence of partisanship on scandal perceptions should be more or less the same in other European states and greater in the United States.

In terms of general political consequences, our findings lead to at least two important conclusions. If partisanship is so important in determining voter opinions, then parties that have strong supporters – and lots of them – will find it easier to maintain even politicians involved in controversies in their positions. In contrast, politicians from small parties will find

that voters quickly turn against them. A second consequence from our findings relates to the fact that the strongest contrast was always between Labour supporters and those identifying with the politician's party. In contrast, the Conservative-Liberal Democrat comparison was generally weaker. This shows that there might be important coalition-related thinking among party identifiers. Conservatives and Liberal Democrats support their government, and ministers involved in scandals are part of that government even if they are from the rival party. This also appears to have an important influence on how partisanship influences opinion formation. Future research could investigate further how partisanship influences how voters react to new information, especially in more complex situations characterised by multi-party systems and coalition governments. Overall, our findings have highlighted both the relevance of general normative standards and the impact of partisanship on voter reactions to political controversy, and future work should consider when, how and why the influence of partisanship can vary.

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Appendix: Questions

1. If there were a general election held tomorrow, which party would you vote for?

Conservative
Labour
Liberal Democrat
Scottish National Party (SNP) / Plaid Cymru
Some other party
Would not vote
Don't know

2. On a scale of 0 to 10, how much attention do you generally pay to politics?

0 Pay no attention
10 Pay a great deal of attention
Don't know

3. Do you believe it is more important to have honest politicians or successful and hardworking politicians?

It is more important to have honest politicians
It is more important to have successful and hardworking politicians
Don't know

4. Please say if you agree or disagree with the following statement: 'Politicians are not that different from people like me.'

Strongly agree
Somewhat agree
Neither agree nor disagree
Somewhat disagree
Strongly disagree
Don't know

5. On balance, would you say that most people can't be trusted or that most people can be trusted? Please use 0-10 scale to indicate your view?

0 Most people can't be trusted
10 Most people can be trusted
Don't know

6. From what you know, which of the following politicians are currently in the UK Cabinet?

Ken Clarke
Chris Huhne
David Laws
Yvette Cooper
Boris Johnson
Theresa May

All of the above
None of the above
Don't know

There have been allegations that Chris Huhne, the Secretary of State for Energy, once asked someone else to falsely claim they were driving his car when he was caught speeding in order to avoid getting points on his driving licence.
It has been alleged that Chris Huhne asked his wife, Vicky Pryce, to take the points on her licence. Mr Huhne and his wife have since separated. Ms Pryce has not confirmed or denied that she took the points on her driving licence.

7. Had you previously seen or heard anything about this?

Yes
No
Don't know

8. Taking everything into account, would you say that his actions were right or wrong?
Please use 0-10 scale to indicate your view?

0 Wrong
10 Right
Don't know

9. Based on what you have seen or heard about the case, do you think Mr Huhne should or should not resign?

Should resign
Should not resign
Don't know

In a radio interview this week Ken Clarke, the Justice Secretary, implied that some types of rape were more serious than others, and that date rape was not "serious, proper rape".
Mr Clarke has since said that he did not intend to suggest this, and that he thinks all rape was serious.

(Questions 7 to 9 repeated for Clarke.)

David Laws resigned from the government shortly after the election when it was revealed that he had broken Parliamentary rules by claiming rent on his expenses for a room hired from his partner. Mr Laws said he made the claims because he wanted to keep his sexuality private, and that he did not benefit financially, as had he registered his partnership he could have claimed for the mortgage of the house instead.
The House of Commons authorities have now decided that Mr Laws did break the rules and have suspended him from the Commons for 7 days. Mr Laws has also repaid the expenses claimed.

(Questions 7 to 9 repeated again for Laws.)

16. For each of the following, please indicate whether you think the act is not wrong at all, wrong but understandable, or wrong and punishable.

A government official gives a job to someone from his family who does not have adequate qualifications

A government official demands a favour or an additional payment for some service that is part of his job

A public official decides to locate a development project in an area where his friends and supporters lived

A cabinet minister promises an appointed position in exchange for campaign contributions.

A cabinet minister uses his or her influence to obtain a contract for a firm in his or her constituency.

At Christmas, an MP accepts a crate of wine from an influential constituent.

A major company makes a substantial donation to the government party. Later, the chair of the company is given an honour.

A local councillor, while chair of the planning committee, authorises a planning permission for property owned by him or her.

An MP is retained by a major company to arrange meetings and dinners in the House of Commons at which its executives can meet Parliamentarians.

An MP uses his or her position to get a friend or relative admitted to Oxford or Cambridge University, or some other prestigious institution.

An MP hires a spouse or other family member to serve as his or her secretary.

An MP is issued a first-class airline ticket as part of a parliamentary delegation. He or she exchanges the ticket for an economy fare and pockets the difference.

A government special advisor begins a relationship with a person who, it is later discovered, works as a prostitute. After the discovery, the person continues to work as a prostitute and the special advisor decides to continue the relationship.

A prime minister does not disclose the fact that he is suffering from a serious medical condition.

Not wrong at all

Wrong but understandable

Wrong and punishable

Figure 1 Distribution of voter opinions on wrongness of politician's actions

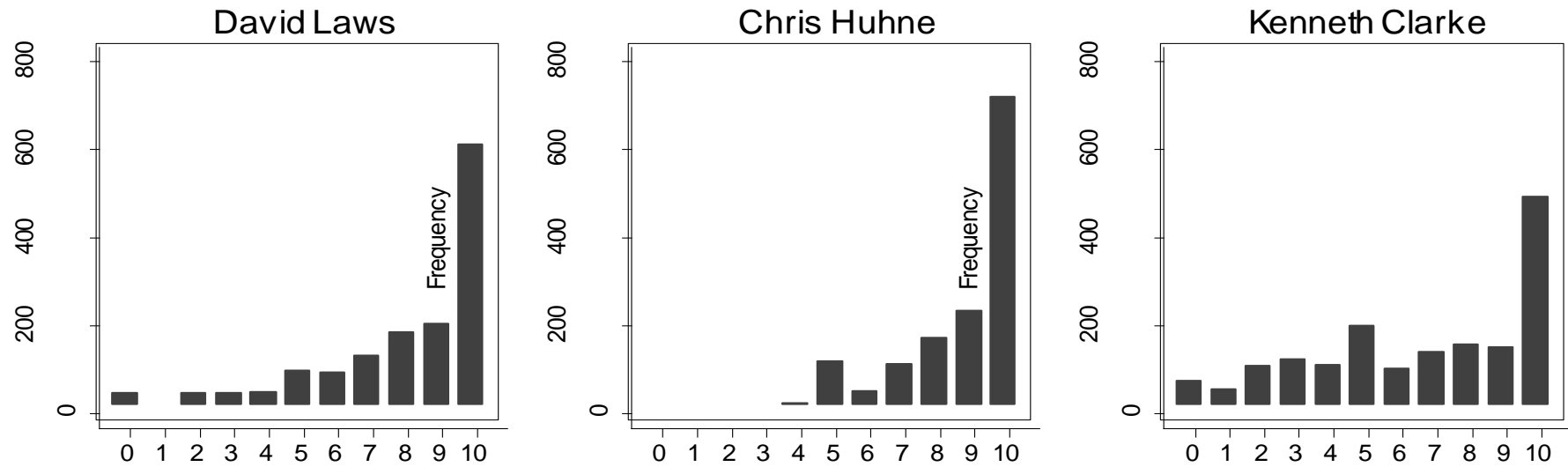
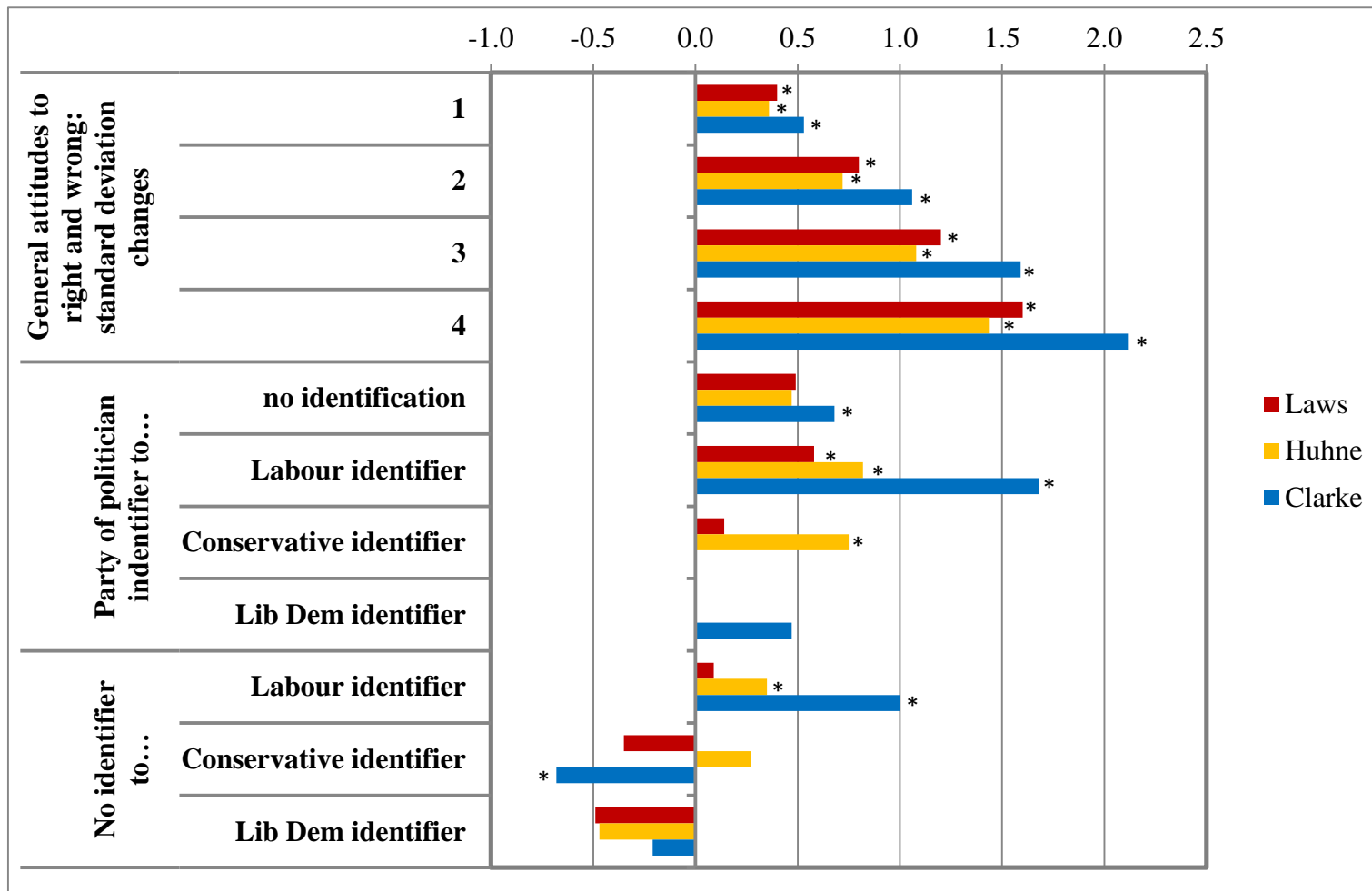
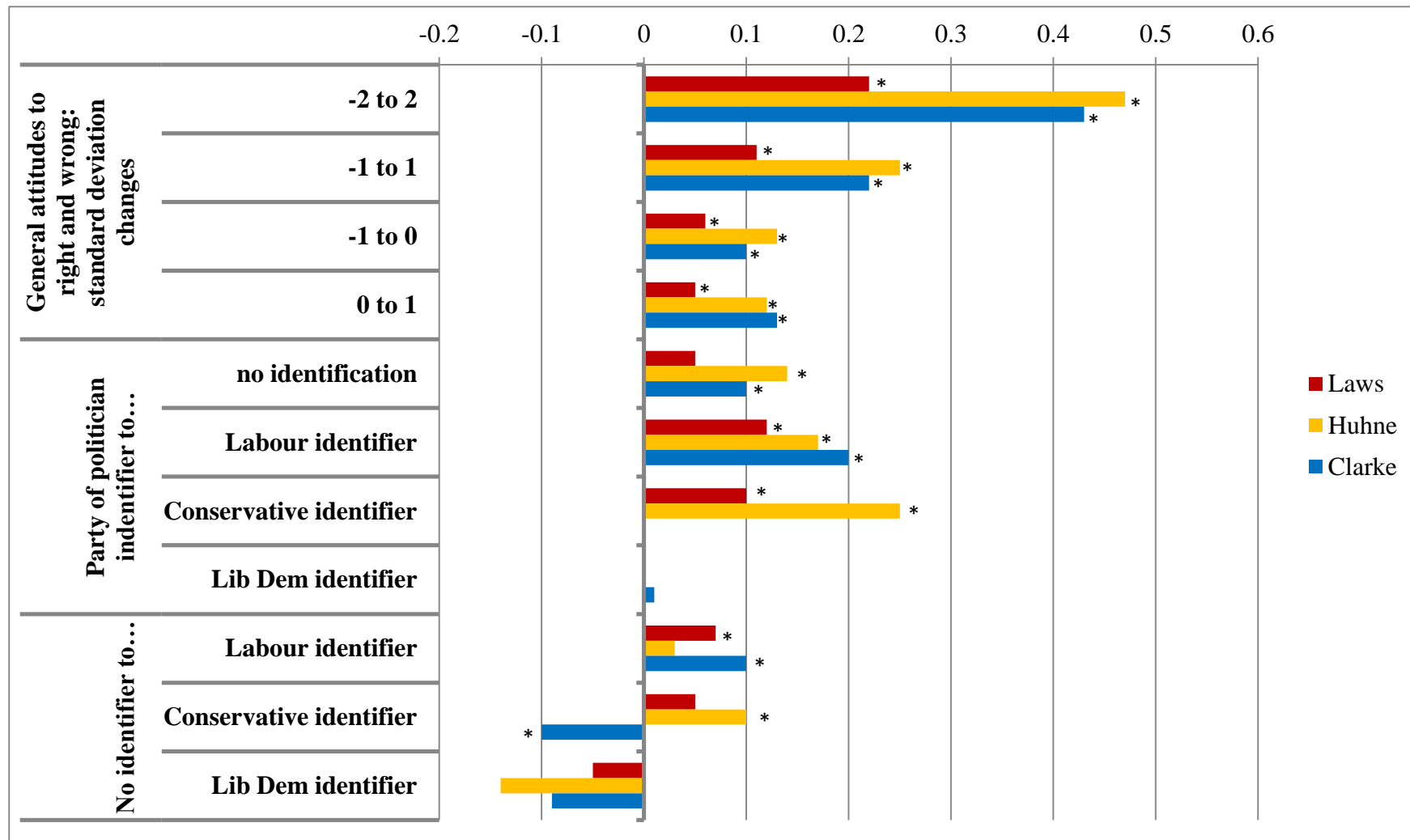


Figure 2 Predicted change in perceived wrongness of a politician's actions



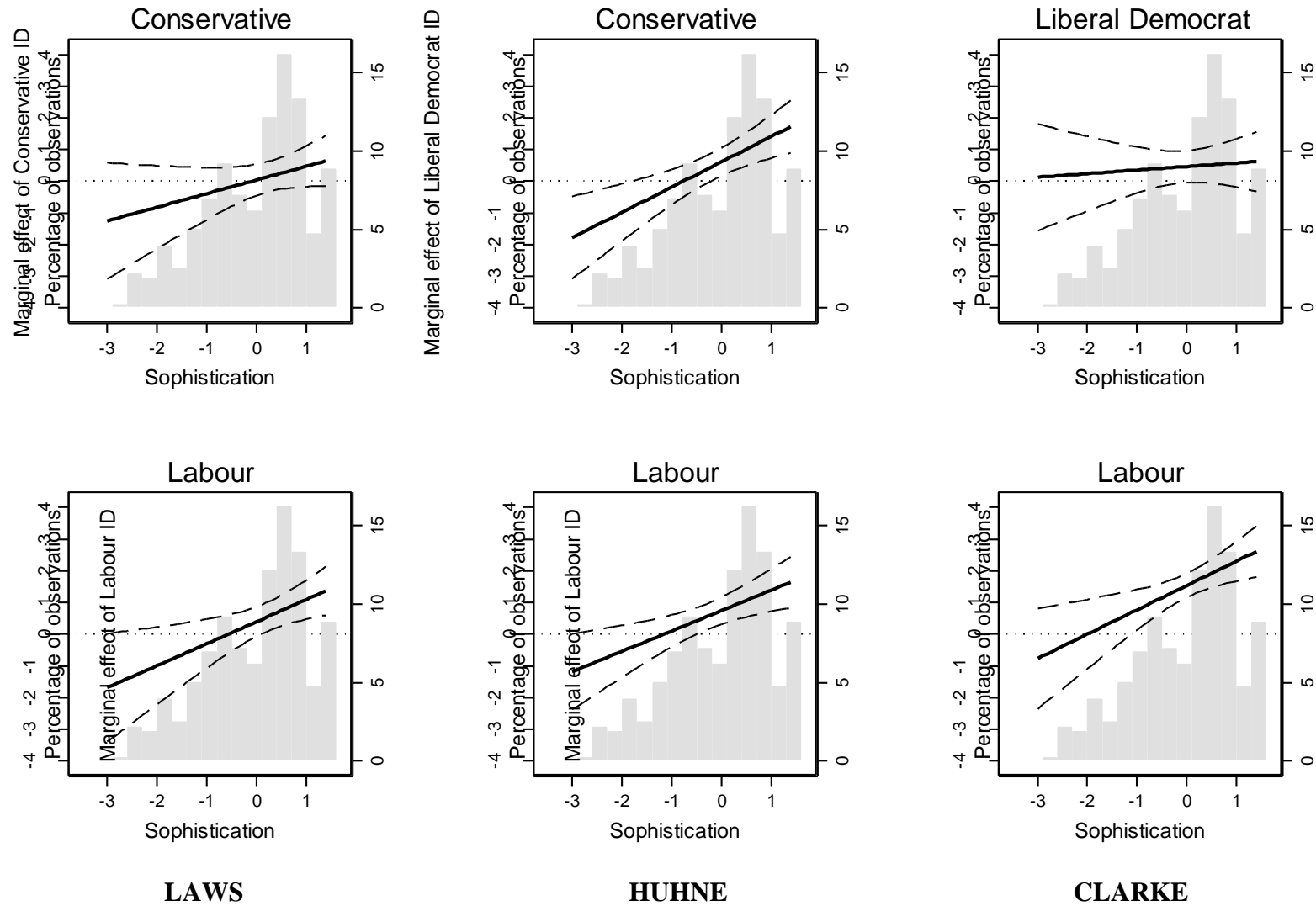
Note: Figure shows the predicted effect of each variable on perceptions of wrongness on a 0-10 scale; effects statistically significant at $p < .05$ indicated by an asterisk.

Figure 3 Predicted change in the predicted probability of saying the politician should resign



Note: Probabilities calculated based on Models 8, 10 and 12 (Table 2) using the Long and Freese (2005) SPost package; effects statistically significant at $p < .05$ indicated by an asterisk.

Figure 4 Effect of party identification conditional on political sophistication



Note: Graphs show the predicted effect of party identification on perception of wrongness on a 0-10 scale, conditional on the level of political sophistication; dashed lines indicate 95% confidence interval.

Table 1 Laws, Huhne, Clarke: Wrongness (OLS regression models)

	Laws		Huhne		Clarke	
	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3	Model 4	Model 5	Model 6
Attitudes towards misconduct	0.483*** (0.076)	0.404*** (0.080)	0.415*** (0.062)	0.364*** (0.066)	0.550*** (0.077)	0.531*** (0.076)
<i>Party identification</i>						
Conservative	0.267 (0.242)	0.143 (0.245)	0.784*** (0.233)	0.746** (0.236)		
Liberal Democrat					0.608* (0.272)	0.470 (0.261)
Labour	0.596* (0.233)	0.576* (0.235)	0.806*** (0.226)	0.824*** (0.226)	1.853*** (0.188)	1.682*** (0.187)
Other	0.909** (0.289)	0.752** (0.288)	0.764* (0.300)	0.671* (0.298)	1.045** (0.321)	0.945** (0.308)
None	0.542* (0.249)	0.490 (0.252)	0.569* (0.249)	0.471 (0.247)	1.185*** (0.223)	0.676** (0.219)
Trust		-0.090* (0.036)		-0.050 (0.031)		-0.108** (0.038)
Politicians are like me		-0.140 (0.146)		0.036 (0.122)		-0.403** (0.153)
Political sophistication		0.150 (0.084)		-0.186** (0.067)		-0.430*** (0.083)
Female		0.030 (0.142)		0.101 (0.116)		0.805*** (0.151)
Age		0.047 (0.028)		0.049* (0.023)		0.020 (0.029)
Age ²		-0.0003 (0.000)		-0.0003 (0.000)		-0.0004 (0.000)
ABC1		-0.030 (0.155)		0.017 (0.122)		-0.35* (0.159)
Constant	7.395*** (0.200)	6.439*** (0.739)	7.812*** (0.210)	6.514*** (0.634)	5.607*** (0.145)	6.433*** (0.726)
N	1462	1450	1440	1430	1648	1638
R ²	0.044	0.061	0.049	0.066	0.097	0.165

Note: standard errors in parentheses; *: p<0.5, **: p<0.01, ***: p<0.001.

Table 2 Laws, Huhne, Clarke: Resignation (Binary logistic regression models)

	Laws		Huhne		Clarke	
	Model 7	Model 8	Model 9	Model 10	Model 11	Model 12
Attitudes towards misconduct	0.409*** (0.066)	0.358*** (0.071)	0.575*** (0.059)	0.535*** (0.062)	0.593*** (0.062)	0.560*** (0.064)
<i>Party identification</i>						
Conservative	0.812*** (0.208)	0.674** (0.218)	1.111*** (0.189)	1.035*** (0.194)		
Liberal Democrat					0.093 (0.210)	0.087 (0.216)
Labour	0.782*** (0.206)	0.833*** (0.216)	0.696*** (0.184)	0.702*** (0.189)	1.043*** (0.144)	1.029*** (0.149)
Other	0.620* (0.291)	0.489 (0.301)	0.978*** (0.255)	0.842** (0.261)	0.707** (0.223)	0.662** (0.227)
None	0.254 (0.218)	0.330 (0.229)	0.621** (0.198)	0.551** (0.205)	0.677*** (0.162)	0.549** (0.169)
Trust		-0.079* (0.037)		-0.096** (0.030)		-0.124*** (0.028)
Politicians are like me		0.143 (0.144)		0.031 (0.118)		-0.121 (0.119)
Political sophistication		0.199* (0.080)		-0.157* (0.067)		-0.050 (0.065)
Female		-0.502*** (0.143)		-0.252* (0.115)		0.302** (0.115)
Age		0.094*** (0.028)		0.061* (0.024)		0.033 (0.025)
Age ²		-0.0007* (0)		-0.0004 (0.000)		-0.0004 (0.000)
ABC1		0.206 (0.151)		-0.188 (0.123)		-0.28* (0.119)
Constant	0.822*** (0.165)	-1.301 (0.712)	-0.242 (0.157)	-0.820512	-1.303*** (0.114)	-1.152 (0.607)
N	1497	1482	1579	1566	1693	1680
-2 log likelihood	-728.532	-686.123	-982.741	-946.996	-991.163	-962.98968

Note: standard errors in parentheses; *: p<0.5, **: p<0.01, ***: p<0.001.

Appendix Table 1 Summary statistics

Variable	n	Mean	Standard deviation	Minimum	Maximum
<i>Continuous</i>					
Attitudes towards political misconduct	1919	0	1	-4.28	1.82
Trust	1916	5.90	2.02	0	10
Political sophistication	1932	0	1	-3.49	1.40
Age	1937	50.07	15.08	19	86
<i>Nominal</i>					
		0	1		
Conservative identifier	1937	71.9%	28.1%		
Labour identifier	1937	68.1%	31.9%		
Liberal Democrat identifier	1937	89.0%	11.0%		
Other party identifier	1937	92.8%	7.2%		
Identifies with no party	1937	78.5%	21.5%		
Politicians are like me	1937	63.8%	36.2%		
Female	1937	46.5%	53.5%		
ABC1	1937	34.2%	65.8%		

Appendix Table 2 Laws, Huhne, Clarke: Wrongness / Sophistication

	Laws Model 13	Huhne Model 14	Clarke Model 15
Attitudes towards misconduct	0.407*** (0.080)	0.360*** (0.066)	0.525*** (0.076)
<i>Party identification</i>			
Conservative	0.040 (0.253)	0.612** (0.226)	
Liberal Democrat			0.445 (0.259)
Labour	0.396 (0.240)	0.746*** (0.216)	1.525*** (0.189)
Other	0.680* (0.293)	0.644* (0.281)	1.004** (0.307)
None	0.395 (0.249)	0.393 (0.245)	0.570* (0.225)
Political sophistication	-0.225 (0.221)	-0.724*** (0.190)	-0.583*** (0.164)
Conservative*sophistication	0.430 (0.280)	0.797*** (0.222)	
Liberal Democrat*sophistication			-0.008 (0.276)
Labour*sophistication	0.693** (0.262)	0.641** (0.211)	0.687*** (0.208)
Other party id*sophistication	0.340 (0.312)	0.403 (0.314)	-0.215 (0.332)
No party id*sophistication	0.062 (0.259)	0.426 (0.226)	-0.134 (0.216)
Trust	-0.090* (0.037)	-0.051 (0.030)	-0.108** (0.038)
Politicians are like me	-0.146 (0.146)	0.045 (0.122)	-0.422** (0.153)
Female	0.037 (0.141)	0.101 (0.117)	0.823*** (0.150)
Age	0.047 (0.029)	0.054* (0.023)	0.015 (0.029)
Age2	-0.0003 (0.000)	-0.0004 (0.000)	-0.0003 (0.000)
ABC1	-0.003 (0.154)	0.027 (0.122)	-0.327* (0.159)
Constant	6.519*** (0.745)	6.442*** (0.631)	6.569*** (0.732)
N	1450	1430	1638
R ²	0.069	0.076	0.176

Note: standard errors in parentheses; *: p<0.5, **: p<0.01, ***: p<0.001.